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AUTHOR Krueger, Rick
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ABSTRACT

In its two-year existence, the federally funded Staples Teacher Center (STC) in Minnesota has had a significant impact on improving classroom instruction and staff development activities in a rural setting, proving that teacher centers are a most effective delivery system for inservice education in sparsely populated areas. Services are rendered on an individual basis, with clients ranging from teachers and aides to administrators and to community members with educational concerns. Examples of STC involvement illustrate the variety of programs and sevices provided: (1) working with a high school art teacher to prepare a unit on lost-wax cast jewelry-making, and facilitating a Fine Arts day at an elementary school with 18 high school students; (2) assisting a high school social studies department in obtaining speakers and materials on local political activities; (3) providing an advisory program for experientially oriented classroom projects; and (4) performing research for a variety of classroom and administrative needs, from launching a hot air balloon to reporting on Japanese management styles. (FG)

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RURAL INSERVICE EDUCATION: STAPLES TEACHER CENTER STYLE

BY RICK KRUEGER - 6/3/81

Introduction:

Educational leaders have long recognized the need for making inservice education a high priority item, since it is a prerequisite to improving classroom instruction on an organizational basis. It is only too obvious that since education is a labor intensive field, investments must be made to develop increased staff quality in the same manner that school districts commonly invest in capital goods for general maintenance and upgrading. Unfortunately, since this is an investment in the future, its effects are not immediately felt when neglected in the present. Hence when reviewing a school district budget one might discover more money being spent on grass seed for the football field or for upgrading computer capabilities than is devoted to staff development. This is a sad commentary on priorities in such a district, since such a policy condemns future students to instructional mediocrity since the teachers eventually lose enthusiasm and become "burned out" because on the whole, methods are not being implemented to help teachers deal with new challenges.

Rural education is changing at an accelerated pace brought on by technological advances, energy problems, and demographic shifts. Students must be prepared through education to function well in an environment where accelerated change is the only constant. There are few who would seriously challenge the assertion that there is a necessity to educate students with skills that are going to be applicable tomorrow, rather than returning to ones that were used yesterday and worn out today. Inservice education is no exception. The traditional "one shot" workshops that many districts rely on for the main mode of providing inservice education are as obsolete as the transistor is to the micro-computer.

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Conditions in the classroom have changed so dramatically that "silicon microchips" must be developed to meet the new needs. It is this writer's contention that teacher centers as a delivery vehicle for inservice education are revolutionalizing inservice education on a worldwide basis as certainly as the invention of the silicon microchip instigated the age of micronics. In other words, the revolution has begun!!! Those who try to repudiate the effects of this movement are certain to fail because of their inability to recognize the factors demanding change in inservice education.

The need in rural areas is great when it comes to inservice education. Most rural school districts are sparsely populated with clusters of populations in small towns separated by distances and identities which compound coordination efforts. Without dwelling on alot of details, it's also likely to find that the problems are frustrations expressed in urban areas regarding declining enrollment, teachers not adequately prepared to teach subjects assigned, transportation, etc., etc., are greatly aggravated in rural communities. This is particularly true of areas that do not have the resources for developing curriculum in a cohesive manner nor are capable of providing other needed ongoing types of technical assistance to their staff.

The Staples Teacher Center:

The Staples Teacher Center (S.T.C.) was created out of a need to respond to some of the general inservice needs of a rural community, but also the desire on the part of educators in Staples to address specific needs in order to improve classroom instruction. It is unique (as are teacher centers across the country), because it responds to local needs and provides local control of the project. The S.T.C. is one of the smaller centers in the country in that it has a primary service area of about two-hundred teachers who are the target population. (It is

worth noting that cooperative programs that are more conducive to larger audiences are cosponsored in cooperation with the state intermediate agency that services the region of the state that Staples is in. Plans are to gradually increase the immediate service area to include several neighboring districts which would double the current population served.)

As for the types of services rendered, there is a sincere attempt to provide programs that are long-term and developmental in nature and that are actually custom-tailored to meet the particular needs of individuals requesting services. In addition, there is a conscious effort to provide services to every group in the school district, ranging from teachers to aides, administrators to community members (primarily groups with specific educational concerns).

Given the individual service nature of the S.T.C., it is virtually impossible to accurately portray all of the various types of services provided. Generally however, most services fall into the categories of improving classroom instruction or staff development. The following list should help to provide some information about the S.T.C.:

* The S.T.C. is a federally funded project under the Teacher Center Program. Its initial funding began September 30, 1979.
* Between 400 to 700 services are rendered to teachers each month. Because the S.T.C. operates on an individual service basis, one should realize that the quality of request and effort it takes to respond vary significantly. Therefore it is feasible that lower numbers may reflect the increased effort it takes to fultil requests. Generally, as time goes on, the quality of requests improve.
* The Policy Board is comprised of sixteen members of which twelve are teachers, two are school board designates, one is a higher education

representative and one is an administrator.

* The staff consists of a director, a half-time liaison teacher (advisor) and a secretary.
* Enthusiasm and trust for the S.T.C. has been established primarily by almost immediate receptiveness on the parts of all district-wide staff and school board. The main focus throughout the project is and will continue to be how to improve classroom instruction.

In order to provide insight into what is being offered through the S.T.C., a few specific examples of instructional programs that the S.T.C. has been involved in include:

* Working with a high school art teacher on a number of occasions to provide research, resources and release time in order that: (1) a unit on lost-wax cast jewelry-making could be designed to include an introductory lesson on videotape, a teachers' manual and a presentation at the State Art Educators Conference, (2) coordination of a Youth Art Month which involved gathering and matting student works K-12 in order to display them in local business establishments, (3) facilitating a Fine Arts Day at a local elementary school using 18 high school students to demonstrate an assortment of different media projects to all the elementary students which involved presentations and hands-on experiences - in addition, at the silk screening demonstration, every student received the school's logo printed on either poster paper or a t-shirt which the student provided, (4) being instrumental in securing a corporate donation to pick up film expenses for designing a unit on European art by the aforementioned art teacher who is participating in an exchange teaching situation with a teacher from England.
* Assisting the high school social studies department with speakers, con-

tacting all political parties with candidates on the last Minnesota Elections Ballot for campaign information, securing elections materials from the Secretary of State's Office and the Ethic Commission, providing videotape equipment for producing "mock political commercials", and generally scrounging around to find recyclables in order that a fall quarter political process course that involved all students grades 9-12, could realistically simulate the political process in Minnesota from precinct caucuses to a national convention and election. In addition, other work with the social studies teachers have included drafting a proposal based on their interests to the National Council of Social Studies, bringing the director of educational services from the State Capitol for individual teacher consultations, lining up a lobbyist to talk to classes, and providing continuous assistance in the area of keeping teachers abreast of state and national programs, projects and events that might interest them.

* Providing an advisor program which is designed to have a liaison teacher from the Teacher Center in the classroom to assist teachers in conducting simulations or other activities that tend to be "experientially oriented" (i.e. designing and bringing a portable wood shop to make projects in the classroom for elementary students, teaching math skills using parlor games and teaching the use of a micro-computer, etc.). The advisor program has received overwhelming approval since it provides direct assistance in the classroom for teachers interested in trying new and exciting approaches to education.

* The S.T.C. worked with upper elementary teachers who tried to have students make and launch a hot air balloon that was approximately 25' in circumference. In this case, the Teacher Center instigated the initial interest, gathered research for the teachers and resources for the students, accumulated the necessary recyclables and was involved in an

assortment of other activities to assist in teaching about aeronautics.

* The S.T.C. has also been instrumental in having brought exotic baby animals from the Minnesota Zoo to all the elementary schools, providing an innovative college course on classroom management in cooperation with an area university, and also securing an art media manufacturer to provide a hands-on workshop on art projects for teachers and community youth organization leaders which included distribution of multiple free sample material.
* Administrators have used the S.T.C. in numerous ways, but generally in the area of research. Recently, efforts have been undertaken to prepare a report on Japanese management styles which would include the feasibility of implementing the shared-decision making model that Japan used in industry and applying it to school administration in Staples.

It is important to note that these examples are provided to illustrate the variety and breadth of the projects and activities which are undertaken by the S.T.C., and not in any means intended to be all-inclusive.

Conclusion:

Although the Staples Teacher Center is less than two years old at the time of this writing, it has already succeeded in having a significant impact on improving classroom instruction and inservice education in the north central rural Minnesota community of Staples, in addition to providing a format from which to design a model for other interested areas in the State. Currently, there are three federally funded centers in Minnesota (Staples, Southwest/West Central and Osseo) and one non-federally funded center (Mpls/University of Minnesota). Their overall efforts have succeeded to the point of receiving acclaim from a number of sources, including an unsolicited endorsement for the concept and practices of teacher centers

found in the Governor's Task Force on Educational Policy - February, 1981. This is probably because the teacher center approach utilizes much of what current research has been unveiling as necessary components in an inservice program, including the cultivation of a trusting environment which permits its participants an opportunity to design programs based on their own inservice needs. There are unquestionably activities which the Staples Teacher Center provides, which on the surface appear to resemble traditional inservice education. However, the three major differences that distinguish the S.T.C. from traditional inservice education approaches are: (1) participant "ownership" of the programs offered, (2) the long-term developmental emphasis on an on-call basis, and (3) the advisor/outreach feature - all of which contribute to being the intregal components of the program.

Currently, there are efforts on a state-wide basis, to put together dissemination materials and provide technical assistance to educators in the field who are interested in starting a teacher center. There is no question that inquiries regarding teacher center programs have been arriving with greater and greater frequency to all four of the centers in the state of Minnesota. On both a state and national basis, there seems to be enough interest and understanding of the problems of traditional inservice education to recognize a new direction must be found. Ample evidence is now available which demonstrates the effectiveness of teacher centers as a delivery vehicle and presents a strong case for why teacher centers should be institutionalized. However, the main question that remains is: "Will the commitment be made soon enough to insure that this concept will be implemented as the main vehicle for delivering inservice education in a meaningful manner, or will inservice education continue to be neglected and/or misunderstood?".